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FLUX METAPHORS IN *SISTER CARRIE*

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Theodore Dreiser believed that Nature is in a constant flux, a concept advanced first by "the Weeping Philosopher," Heraclitus (c535-c475 B.C.), and pursued, in due course, by Plato (c427-347 B.C.) and the train of Neo-Platonists who followed in his wake. Dreiser evidently came upon the idea in the works of Emerson, who assimilated it into his own thought, with some modifications, after encountering it in the writings of the Egyptian Neo-Platonist, Plotinus (A.D. 205?-270?).¹

In *Sister Carrie*, among several flux allusions generating from Carrie, the rocking chair allusions stand preeminent. Tidal allusions, however, are of comparable importance and are less conspicuous only because they blend more thoroughly into the fabric of the narrative. They, in turn, are organically allied to bird and ship allusions which relate to the very essence of the novel.

In the context of Dreiser's myriad flux allusions, the title, *Sister Carrie*, merits particular notice. When the present writer was a college senior he was surprised one day to see his nine-year-old sister settling down to read *Sister Carrie*. When he asked her about her interest in the book, she explained, "The school librarian told me it's a nice story about a nun." The school librarian was not the only one to make that assumption. Before he read the book, even William Lengel, who assisted Dreiser when he edited the Buttrick pub-

lications, wondered how such a fellow had found it in him to write a book about a nun. Leslie Fiedler, adapting himself to this misconception, concludes that Dreiser intended the title to be a quasi-religious pun. Carrie ends, he says, as "a kind of unchurched nun, celibate, lonely, and dedicated to charity...."² But this description fits several of Dreiser's heroines--Jennie Gerhardt, Berenice Fleming, Etta Barnes--as well as Carrie.

To some readers the title, *Sister Carrie*, acquires relevancy as a reference to Dreiser's wayward sister, Emma, from whose history the story drew substance. Fiedler himself offers the further suggestion that Dreiser, in *Sister Carrie*, is redeeming Emma, vicariously, "from the shabby failures of actual life."³ It might be argued as well that Dreiser saw the term "sister" as a universalizing term, stressing Carrie's common ties with humanity, with Carrie's "sisterhood" inviting all mankind to pause to consider its kinship with her, as fellow waifs, partaking under the material thrust of the American Dream, and its counterparts elsewhere, of her misdirected destiny.

Yet another, more functional explanation for Dreiser's choice of a title has been overlooked, however. The term "Mother Carey's chickens" is used familiarly by mariners as a synonym for the sea bird "the stormy petrel," a lonely wanderer, the orphan of the bird world. Mariners, indeed, at times, have sought to call attention to their own nomadic and homeless state by identifying themselves as being "one of Mother Carey's chickens." Dreiser's own predilection for birds and proneness to identify himself with them can easily be demonstrated. It would not have been unusual for him, therefore, to have conferred similar identity on certain of his characters. F.O. Matthiessen, in fact, has suggested that Dreiser chose to call the heroine of "The Lost Phoebe" Phoebe to identify her with the bird of that name. Conceivably Dreiser thought of *Sister Carrie* as "one of Mother Carey's chickens." As an unsponsored wanderer (one of the first such women in American literature), this identity would have suited her well. It would emphasize, too, a separation from the mother (the term "Mother Carey" is presumed to have derived from the term "*mater cara*," an epithet used by sailors of the Mediterranean world to signify the Blessed Virgin, patroness of mariners), a circumstance of especial meaning to Dreiser himself. Recalling his own circumstances, following the death of his mother, as he stood at the threshold of life, Dreiser observed later: "Apart from her I did not really desire anyone else so much--really wished only to be alone for the time being--as I was for many years thereafter--a lone barque on a lone sea." That the title, *Sister Carrie*, finds its genesis in

such an association, gathers support from Dreiser's further observation:

I saw myself a stormy petrel hanging over the yellowish-black waves of life and never really resting anywhere. I could not; my mind would not let me. I saw too much, knew too much. What was I, what any one, but a small bit of seaweed on an endless sea, flotsam, jetsam, being moved hither and thither--by what subterranean tides?⁴

Bird, and tide, and ocean waste, here linked intimately together, used interchangeably to indicate Dreiser's orphaned state and bewilderment before the mystery of ceaseless flux, emphasize not merely his personal sense of being orphaned but give new significance to the tidal imagery found throughout *Sister Carrie*. As one of Mother Carey's chickens, as a stormy petrel, Carrie's natural habitat would be the roiling waters so often brought into consociation with her. The name Dreiser gave to his heroine, then, whether or not he consciously willed it (and he claimed the name just sprang into his mind), brilliantly brings together his preoccupation with flux and his overwhelming concern for man's role as cosmic waif, wandering in the turbulence of an unexplained universe.

The caption of the first chapter of *Sister Carrie* identifies her as "A Waif Amid Forces," its preeminence meant undoubtedly to focus attention on her role as orphan and seeker. From start to finish, in *Sister Carrie*, bird and marine imagery combine with motion allusions to signalize her status. She meets Drouet and Dreiser confides: "She could not realize that she was drifting, until he secured her address."⁵ This episode, be it noted, occurs while they are being hurtled through the countryside on a train. Chapter one closes with the thought--"She was much alone, a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea" (SC, 13). Here, surely, is the stormy petrel, much as Dreiser described it in *A Book About Myself*. Next, seeking work and awed by the thought of confronting someone with her request, Carrie "fluttered feebly at the heart..." (SC, 18). Around her "She felt the flow of the tide of effort and interest--felt her own helplessness without quite realizing the wisp on the tide that she was" (SC, 26). From the crowds on the street, where Carrie drifted forelornly, "Scraps of conversation and notes of laughter floated to her" (SC, 27). But from this she was apart. When once she does find work, she strolls "first toward the river which interested her..." (SC, 32). Confidence now takes hold. For the moment her fears cannot "find a harbourage" (SC, 33). Tentatively sheltered, her status as stormy petrel momentarily is suspended. When she accepts Drouet's offer of protection she seems to be on a safe course. Significantly, when she flees

the Hansons, Drouet awaits her and they go off together by car, Dreiser often using rides in trains, carriages, cars, and other vehicles to show a character caught up in the universal flux (SC, 67). But the marine imagery returns. From the window of the apartment Carrie shares with Drouet, she watches a cloud "shaped like some island in a far-off sea." (SC, 70). Out walking with Drouet when she meets one of her former co-workers, "Carrie felt as if some great tide had rolled between them" (*Ibid*). The stormy petrel seemed well on her way to some safe haven. Yet Carrie's sister Minnie Hanson dreams of her now being borne away on dangerous waters (SC, 72-73).

For an interval Carrie seems secure: "In the view of a certain stratum of society, Carrie was comfortably established--in the eyes of the starveling, beaten by every wind and gusty sheet of rain, she was safe in a halcyon harbor" (SC, 81). Here her identification with the stormy petrel (i.e. "the starveling"), as one of Mother Carey's chickens, is made explicit. Yet soon Carrie is described as looking apprehensively at a sparrow perched abjectly upon a wire, bitten into by the chill winds of approaching winter (SC, 83). She senses here how tentative her own security is. Yet she is mature enough to want more than Drouet offers. Her dependency on him is not such that she lives in dread "of being swept away and left without an anchorage" (SC, 84). Were she to experience "the slightest tide of success" he could not hope to hold her (SC, 85). The affair with Hurstwood now progresses: "The little shop-girl was getting into deep water. She was letting her few supports float away from her" (SC, 104). Complications deepen and Carrie is "all at sea mentally" (SC, 117). She has a rendezvous with Hurstwood in Jefferson Park. For the occasion she wears a "sailor hat" and the scene is graced with twittering, joyous sparrows (SC, 126). When Hurstwood opened his heart to her: "She felt a wave of feeling sweep over her" (SC, 128).

Carrie's interest in the stage awakens: "Every fancy... now came back as a returning tide after the ebb" (SC, 135). Her debut is a success and she is "in fine feather" (SC, 161). Soon now Hurstwood importunes her to leave Drouet: "She felt a flood of feeling....She realized the flood gates were open" (SC, 171). Once again Carrie is "drifting and finding nothing at which to catch" (*Ibid*). And, also, "drifting, until she was on a borderless sea of speculation" (*Ibid*). The relevance of these allusions is so unmistakable, no one could suppose they are not under Dreiser's control. His marine images here, even as cliches, never are given indiscriminately to the wrong speakers or introduced at times when they can do nothing to advance the concept of Carrie as stormy petrel or drifter on the oceans of life. Indeed, a part of Dreiser's conscious

intention to bolster the context of melodrama he has had recourse to, is to make cliches serve his bidding in such fashion.

As Hurstwood enlarges his commitments to Carrie, severing the ties that bind him to his social situation, Dreiser extends to him a pattern of marine imagery which parallels that which he has applied to Carrie. His wife confronts him, taking "the wind out of his sails" (SC, 183). In these circumstances, "He was like a vessel, powerful and dangerous, but rolling and floundering without sail" (*Ibid*). William L. Phillips has remarked the frequent storm images Dreiser uses to describe Hurstwood's relationship with his wife. These, as in the above instance, arise naturally out of the marine imagery that centers on Carrie.

Hurstwood's open break with his wife comes when she learns that he has been seen riding with another woman, i.e. caught up in a flux activity that excludes her. Meanwhile, about the same time, Drouet learns of Carrie's perfidiousness. He asks her about her rides with Hurstwood. The flux activity Carrie and Hurstwood had sought together now emerges as a threat to their serenity. Carrie's "ebbing courage," as she comes up to the confrontation, hints at a reemergence of her condition of waifhood (SC, 186). In fact, the break with Drouet comes and she is, once again, "an anchorless, storm-beaten little craft which could do absolutely nothing but drift" (SC, 191).

As Hurstwood's family crisis deepens, Hurstwood hopes fervently that things "would not drift along to catastrophe..." (SC, 196). Looking from a window, at a crowd, from which he is separated, it seems to him "The street looked like a sea of round black cloth roofs, twisting, bobbing, moving" (SC, 197). The suggestion of houses-migrant subtly emphasizes his own impending nomadism as a miscast stormy petrel drifting on the lonely ocean. Carrie, momentarily affrighted after dismissing Drouet even while she has no other means to maintain herself in her present style, takes heart again when she goes for a stroll and is greeted by "sparrows...twittering merrily in joyous choruses" (SC, 205). She wishes "over and over that something might interfere now to preserve for her the comfortable state which she had occupied" (*Ibid*).

While Carrie blandly hopes, Hurstwood, in a chapter entitled "When Waters Engulf Us We Reach for a Star," moves to the final break with the world he has known. Confronting the open office safe, he "floundered among a jumble of thoughts" (SC, 219). Then comes the abduction of Carrie and they are aboard "the flying train" (SC, 227). Carrie looks out at "the flying scenery" (SC, 233), and all but forgets the way in which her journey has come about. She is "drifting mentally,

unable to say to herself what to do" (SC, 232). Detroit marks a point of crucial decision. Here she may either turn back or go on with Hurstwood. She elects to go on. The decision is marked by a ferry-boat trip--voyages on water, in Dreiser's works, of however brief duration, always are symbolic--which preludes resumption of the journey (SC, 233).

In Montreal, the sun breaks through--"Sparrows were twittering. There was laughter and song in the air" (SC, 241). Hurstwood's courage returns. They go on to New York. Here, coming into the city, Carrie has her first view of the coast. Like any stormy petrel, "The sight of a few boats in the Harlem and more in the East River tickled her young heart. It was the first sign of the great sea" (SC, 243). Hurstwood's response is more guarded: "The sea was already full of whales. A common fish must needs disappear wholly from view--remain unseen. In other words, Hurstwood was nothing" (SC, 245). Carrie bravely, expectantly, accepts her new environment: "She...marveled at the whistles of the hundreds of vessels in the harbour--the long, low cries of the Sound steamers and ferry-boats when fog was on. The mere fact that these things spoke from the sea made them wonderful" (SC, 252). Her submission to her environment inevitably follows: "She seemed ever capable of getting herself into the tide of change where she would be easily borne along" (SC, 258). As with the rocking chair allusions at this stage of the novel, Carrie's status as marine drifter or stormy petrel now is usurped by Hurstwood. She entertains a parting memory of her former status in Chicago--"drifting at her wits' ends, and all Chicago a cold and closed world, from which she only wandered because she could not find work"--then adapts contentedly to her new environment (SC, 268).

When Hurstwood's fortunes fail to prosper in New York, his eyes lose their "buoyant, searching shrewdness" (SC, 275). At his suggestion Carrie and he move to humbler quarters forfeiting their "west view of the river" (SC, 278). He takes refuge from disappointment and frustration in his newspapers--"What Lethian waters were these floods of telegraphed intelligence!" (SC, 288). We find him reading, in his remoteness, of "the wrecking of a vessel in ice and snow off Prince's Bay on Staten Island," an ominous maritime disaster (*Ibid*). Undisturbed, by contrast he extracts a sense of security from the warm room in which he is huddled. At length it is disclosed: "He was content to droop supinely while Carrie drifted out of his life" (SC, 329). Carrie goes for a carriage ride with an escort and fails to get back to the flat to prepare his dinner. The flux of life summons her elsewhere. Hurstwood's gestures of protest grow feebler. He is seen "drifting farther and farther into a situation which could have but one

ending" (SC, 335). In the chapter subtitled "The Empty Shell," Carrie at length harkens to "the voice of the sparrows" announcing spring outside her window (SC, 363). While Hurstwood is out "idly seeking" ships in the Harlem River, Carrie takes flight from their spent love nest (*Ibid*). Her identification is with the winged life of Nature; Hurstwood's with the sluggish river traffic.

In the days that follow her departure, Carrie goes out for carriage rides or loses herself complacently in surging sidewalk crowds, while Hurstwood mopes apathetically (SC, 367). Eventually we find him in the street, standing with the captain's group of vagrants, waiting for someone else to solve his need for shelter. His own strength is gone. He is "buoyed up slightly by the long line of which he was a part" (SC, 393). Later, amid the "vast crowd that surged along" he finds his way to charity soup kitchens (SC, 405). He is "of the class which simply floats and drifts, every wave of people washing up one, as breakers do driftwood upon a stormy shore" (SC, 406). "Crowds....coaches and...cable cars" surge along the thoroughfares of New York. But, in this world of flux, he has no role to play. He finds his way to a flophouse. "Like logs floating" the men press against the entrance and disappear within (SC, 415). Then--the final scene--the boat moving out from the pier at Twenty-seventh Street, carrying its cargo of nameless bodies to Potter's Field. For George Hurstwood, the journey of the spirit is ended (SC, 417).

In "Rivers of the Nameless Dead," Dreiser wrote:

There is an island surrounded by rivers, and about it the tide scurries fast and deep. It is a beautiful island...magnificently populated....many splendid mansions line its streets....it is seemingly a place of opportunity and happiness....Glory for those who enter its walls seeking glory....

And such waters....whispering and gurgling about the docks and piers, and flowing, flowing, flowing....

Here, when the great struggle has been ended, when the years have slipped by and hopes of youth have not been realized; when the dreams of fortune...have all been abandoned--the weary heart may come and find surcease. Peace in the waters, rest in the depths and the silence of the hurrying tide; surcease and an end in the chalice of the waters which wash the shores of the beautiful island.⁶

Here, metaphorically, Dreiser describes, in terms applicable to Hurstwood, the last desperate turning toward Nature of those who have failed in their pursuit of the American Dream. Most

remarkably, the Grail image in the concluding phase (which finds a parallel in the closing pages of *The Titan*), invites the reader to see the very waters themselves as the embodiment of the flux of Nature which is the true goal of man's questing, that flux being the world soul that lies behind creation.

The tidal imagery which appears in *Sister Carrie*, and elsewhere also in Dreiser's works, is not without an element of terror. Not improbably Dreiser dreaded the flux of Nature even as he conceded its sovereignty, dreading it perhaps as the Unknown. A clue to his attitude is found in a passage in *Dawn* describing an experience which must have occurred in his earliest childhood--certainly well before his seventh year:

Now from my earliest conscious recollections of natural phenomena, I seem to have been dubious of water. Or at least I had been made fearful by my brother Rome, who once took my brother Al, my sister Trina and myself out in a small row-boat upon the Wabash River, a to me mysterious, ominous and most uncertain body or thing which had motion and hence life, maybe. I think I must have been overawed by its quantity and movement....there it was, strange and fearsome. And then when a stern-propelled steamboat...came into view around a bend and after passing, left in its wake a ripple which rocked our small craft, I was panic-stricken. In fact, for some four or five years thereafter I could not view any considerable body of water without having brought back to me most clearly that particular sensation of something that could and might destroy me, and that with almost personal violence.⁷

Dreiser never seems to have been able to subdue entirely that early-felt alarm in the presence of water. With it he mingled awe and perhaps reverence also, for a power of Nature marvelously characteristic of the very process of Nature. But he found it difficult to free his mind from the notion that man had nothing to fear from this process. Once, after publication of *Sister Carrie* and because of the depression experienced when it failed to receive its due, he had thought to drown himself but, at the sight of the river, drew back. Although he told himself that the waters of the earth were benevolent, they ever awakened terrors in his soul.

As he does with the rocking chair image, Dreiser reapplies the marine image to Carrie in the last pages of *Sister Carrie*--thus emphasizing once again how deliberately these two allusions complement one another. Carrie has supposed that she has found security until, in a chapter entitled "Stirring Troubled Waters," Robert Ames's criticisms disquiet her. She finds her-

self "drifting away from the old ideal which had filled her... for a long time" (SC, 403). Then comes Ames with his appeal to her to change--"The effect of this was like roiling helpless waters" (SC, 404). The stormy petrel once again is without perch or harborage. Carrie is encountered finally, straining to grasp "the ebb and flow of the ideal," and "Ever harkening to the sound of beauty, straining for the flash of its distant wings..." (SC, 416). Carrie must go on with her journey of the spirit, now as stormy petrel, now as rocking chair voyager, pursuing vicariously Nature's relentless flux and its unrevealed goal, somewhere one with Beauty, through which, as Berenice Fleming was later to conclude, the face of the Divine All shines.

¹Mildred Fielding, Dreiser's patroness, from Malden, Massachusetts, early introduced him to Emerson's works. Curiously, their friendship quickened when Dreiser wrote for her an account of finding the body of a drifter on a river bank.

²Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: 1960), p. 244.

³*Ibid.*

⁴Theodore Dreiser, *A Book About Myself* (New York: 1965), p. 28.

⁵Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: 1959), p. 10.

⁶Theodore Dreiser, *The Color of a Great City* (New York: 1923), pp. 284-86.

⁷Theodore Dreiser, *Dawn* (New York: 1931), p. 28.

REVIEWS

DREISER'S EARLY LABORS

An Amateur Laborer, edited by Richard Dowell, James L. W. West III, and Neda Westlake. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1983. xlix & 207pp.

This edition of *An Amateur Laborer* makes available the original for some of the more familiar episodes in the Dreiser story: the serious nervous breakdown after *Sister Carrie*, the encounter with his brother Paul in front of the Imperial Hotel on Broadway, the stay at Muldoon's sanatorium, and the days spent as a workman for the New York Central Railroad. The hold this period had upon Dreiser's imagination, particularly as he came to formulate his own re-emergence as a writer, is demonstrated in Richard Dowell's careful, scholarly introduction. Dowell shows how Dreiser worked and reworked these events in sketches and short stories, in *The "Genius"*, and in autobiography. It is no surprise, therefore, that they have become the staples of Dreiser biography. What is surprising is how much fuller and more revealing--and downright gripping--is Dreiser's version than biographical summaries have led us to expect.

Seen in hindsight, the *Laborer* foreshadows the direction Dreiser's writing would take. For one thing, he turns with considerable skill and energy to self-dramatization as a mode of expression. The occasion for this, his first extended account of himself, is a crisis with a long literary history: "I was a writer, but now my power to write was taken from me." Conscious of earlier variations on this theme, Dreiser incorporates into his story key passages from, among others, Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, and Whitman. Yet he also gives his

prose ode to dejection a distinctly modern twist. The narrative stance opens up to us the mind of a writer who would always be willing to entertain at least two contradictory ideas at once. Many voices emerge from these pages, as Dreiser uncovers the drama in the divisions of his own personality. One side of him--suspicious, acutely self-conscious, scornful of both extremes of the social ladder--laments his apparent loss in the struggle for "a position of power and fame." This frustrated claimant to the American success story is accompanied by a shadow figure who echoes a tradition of philosophical idealism that was already dated in the early 1900s:

...all life--animal and vegetable--was bound up, so far as their individual conditions were concerned, in a great overruling Providence--fate, power or star, under which they were born, by which they were protected....

We have, in short, perhaps the purest testament by the novelist of conflicting voices--all of which compete for our attention at once, arguing various "philosophies," at times crassly materialistic and self-centered, at times nobly idealistic and compassionate. Dreiser nowhere articulated more clearly what he calls here his "strange duality of person" than in this meditation on his long crisis. Out of fits of hallucination, of excruciating psychosomatic disorders, there comes to him a vision that is at the heart of his troubled genius.

I seemed to lose consciousness of that old, single individuality which was me and to become two persons. One of these was a tall thin greedy individual who had struggled and thought always for himself and how he should prosper, but was now in a corner and could not get out, and the other was a silent, philosophical soul who was standing by him watching him in his efforts and taking an indifferent interest in his failures...I marveled at him, thinking this was truly the oversoul in me...This other person was a more courageous individual than I--cold, immovable, indifferent--for he did not trouble over my worries in the least. Always he was with me when I stood outside shop doors and hesitated to go in...He was not sorry for me. He was not ashamed of me...He was very wise and sane and I had great faith in him. What the presence of this superior consciousness meant to me I can hardly say. It was my refuge and my salvation. He would not go crazy. In all probability he would bring me through.

Dreiser's Emersonian double embodies the major motif of

the *Laborer*. For despite the painful scenes of neurosis and destitution, Dreiser's theme is one of spiritual triumph. "I have fought a battle for the right to live," he announces at the start, "and for the present, musing with stilled nerves and a serene gaze, I seem the victor." Later renditions of this difficult time, which stress the wound inflicted by the hostile reception of his first novel, have obscured the intent of the *Laborer*. In 1904, Dreiser sought mainly to convince himself and his intended readers that he had survived as an artist. So while he portrayed, in unforgettable scenes, his endurance and remarkable capacity for sustained isolation, he put special emphasis on his creative responses to the life around him, and, above all, on his unshakeable faith in his identity as a writer. "I was given to write," he insists, and to this gift he entrusts the strange duality of person that he suffers.

The *Laborer*, then, forces us to reassess the story Dreiser himself later promoted about his victimization by a philistine society. Literary history had acquiesced in this cliché and promoted the legend of Dreiser's "silent decade"--the ten-year writer's block precipitated by the "suppression" of *Sister Carrie*. Recent reappraisals of documents like this one, the Philadelphia diary, and the unpublished "Down Hill and Up" have upset older assumptions and revealed a more complex pattern to Dreiser's early career. The present editors have provided, in addition to a meticulously edited text of 177 pages (itself a challenge to the notion of complete creative paralysis), new evidence that further modifies the once widely held belief.

Dowell's introduction, in filling in the background to Dreiser's literary activities, reinforces the view of a man who was indeed "given to write." In the least productive years, Dreiser kept sending out and getting published sketches, poems and essays, some of which would later be collected in *Twelve Men* and *The Color of A Great City*. In addition, he worked on *Jennie Gerhardt* until early 1903. In January 1904, within weeks of quitting his job with the railroad, Dreiser's experiences were being turned into articles like "The Toil of the Laborer." Thanks to the good detective work of textual editor James West, we can date some of the early leaves of the *Laborer*--apparently fair copies of previous drafts--to February 13, 1904. To this add: the editing of dime novels for Street and Smith, the shrewd management of the 1907 Dodge edition of *Sister Carrie*, publishing ventures like the short-lived *Bohemian*, a variety of editorial jobs, and a complete version of *Jennie Gerhardt* in typescript by December 1910.

What all this points to is not a silent decade but a cal-

culated decade in which Dreiser, anxiously seeking acceptance from the stiffcollars who supervised American literary fashion, prepared himself for a reentry through the establishment's front door. That the reentry would require a long frontal assault, not a truce with white flags in hand, Dreiser did not know in 1904. *An Amateur Laborer* is a rare and compelling piece, but it is also a curiously unfocused fragment. Dreiser's decision to abandon it presents no mystery. He didn't stop because he had won all his battles or run out of gas. The work remains incomplete largely because he was yet to put aside caution and return to the note he had struck, almost without realizing it, in *Sister Carrie*. There are no villains in the *Laborer*; the later culprits, the Doubledays and other arbiters of native taste, never enter the picture. Instead, Dreiser traces his troubles to physical problems, to overindulgence, to a fear of failure, even, as a last resort, to a kind of mystical fatalism. Yet his creative energies most often thrived on villains, real or imagined. Put another way, Dreiser had not yet formulated the links between his breakdown and his revolt against the literary order of things that was to become the abiding metaphor of his career as a writer. As general editor Neda Westlake remarks, "In 1904 he was too close to his material to reach a coherent solution to the questions which the experience had raised." To their credit, the editors resist the temptation to fall back upon the stories Dreiser had foisted upon his first biographers.

They also deserve high marks for transforming a motley, truncated manuscript into a finely edited book. The decision to treat the twenty-four finished chapters as "public documents" and the fragmentary material, of some 15,000 words, as "private documents" may annoy a few purists, but most readers will welcome a clean, readable text. Personal taste will dictate judgment on the decision to place the explanatory notes, as well as the good illustrations, at the back of the book. One complaint: there is no index. Since this is, among other things, a sourcebook for scholars, an index would have been useful. In writing this, I found myself trying to recall certain facts: Where is the Whitman quotation? Does Dreiser mention *Sister Carrie*? Where does he first meet Paul? There should be easy access to such information, as well as to Dowell's many references to secondary studies, unpublished correspondence, and pieces that derive from the *Laborer*.

The last word, however, must be one of appreciation to the editors for providing a valuable addition to the Dreiser canon. One wishes only for more, and if they had decided to add to this book the later companion piece to *An Amateur Laborer*, "Down Hill and Up," no one would have complained.

DREISER'S COURTSHIP LETTERS: PORTENTS OF A DOOMED MARRIAGE

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In January 1957, the Lilly Library at Indiana University received a collection of Dreiseriana from Mrs. Leo Vogt, the niece of Dreiser's first wife, Sara, or "Jug," as she was affectionately called. Included in this collection were Dreiser's courtship letters from May 1896 into September 1898, numerous pieces of correspondence to and from Dreiser during his tenure as editor of the *Delineator*, several photographs of Sara and Dreiser taken during the early years of their marriage, a few cartoon sketches of Dreiser, and a file of newspaper and magazine clippings. At the outset, these materials were available to authorized scholars for perusal only; however, in 1970, because of what Mrs. Vogt considered a violation of her conditions by one user, the collection was closed to all. The sole exception was Dr. Vera Dreiser, who gained permission to quote from the "Jug" letters in *My Uncle Theodore* (1976). In January 1983, following the death of Mrs. Vogt, the collection was reopened without restrictions other than those placed on all unpublished Dreiser manuscripts.

Of most interest to Dreiser scholars will doubtless be the sixty-nine courtship letters. Unfortunately, this correspondence has been heavily edited, apparently to excise passages in which Dreiser became too explicit about their sexual desires and conduct. Such deletions were made by heavy black ink lines or by the removal of entire pages and half pages. Also, internal evidence strongly suggests that many of Dreiser's letters to Sara during that period were either not preserved or not sent on to the Lilly. Nevertheless, what remains is a rich biographical source for the study of Dreiser's early years in New York.

For the first fifteen months of the correspondence, Dreiser was the editor of *Ev'ry Month* magazine and commented frequently on his policies, successes and frustrations with that journal. He also wrote of the theatrical productions he attended, books he was reading, friends and celebrities he had been with, family reunions in New York, his uncertain health,

and his enthusiasm for William Jennings Bryan's Presidential campaign of 1896. After Dreiser left *Ev'ry Month* to become a free-lance journalist, the letters were often filled with descriptions of his travels to collect material for articles, impressions of the people he interviewed, assessments of his economic potential, and proud comments on his growing reputation as a poet.

First and foremost, however, these letters tell the ominous story of an ardent but ambivalent suitor's attempt to hold yet stall his obviously impatient fiancée. As such, they are portents of a marriage doomed to failure. The opening letter of the collection was written to Dreiser's "Own Darling Honey Girl" on May 1, 1896. At this time, their courtship was in its third year, and Dreiser had just returned to New York from Missouri, where he had briefly visited Sara after a twenty-one-month separation. This opening letter and the ones that followed throughout May were litanies of devotion and despair, expressing his eagerness to have her in New York to give meaning to his otherwise meaningless existence. "Oh, my own Jug!" he wrote on May 2, "What a lover you are. You are Sapphic in your fire. You love as I never dreamed a woman could, before I met you. You have widened my heart and life. . . . You are all in all to me. I will never be happy until I see you again and I love you, love you, love you, as only you know and can understand. I kiss you, dearie. I fold you close in my arms and sigh to you, in spirit at least."

On June 12, Dreiser sent Sara a ring and followed it with an outpouring of letters expressing his sexual eagerness; however, there was also a frequent refrain that must have been disturbing to her: their marriage would have to be contingent on his economic success. "I want money to buy rich dresses and soft luxurious lingerie and best of all I want you with me, in warm, voluptuous embrace for nights and nights, unending," he rhapsodized on July 10. "I shall be your attentive lover and you will be mine to fondle and caress, my little Venus, whom I shall fold warm and breathless in my arms, whose lips I shall smother with burning kisses."

When by mid-August these passionate longings had led to no definite plans, the impatient Sara began to accuse Dreiser of neglect. She also was writing less frequently. Panicked by her tone, he insisted that his health had been poor much of the summer, announced that he was planning another visit to Missouri in September, and begged her to avoid involvement with another lover. "If many more days go by and no letter comes I shall do something desperate," he warned on August 20. Then he received a letter in which Sara admitted that she had been "reckless." Dreiser's response on August 23 was a long,

rambling appeal to her sympathy. He concluded, "But Jug, if you have really changed, don't hesitate to say so. You would be more generous in expressing yourself instantly than in covertly wearying of me and yet professing love. I do not want you if you have been, as you say, reckless." Her reply, in which Dreiser must have read dalliance, brought a melodramatic reproach from him on September 1.

I love you, though I half hate you with it. It seems as if I could take your life and yet I should want you in my arms, close to my heart, to do it; so that your last sigh might be mine, for I do love you. . . . You think you can coquette and still twine me about your fingers. You are happy to see that you can repel me and then bring me back at your leisure; your pleasure. You are making a fool of me and none could realize it better than I. Well you can at present for I love you, but be generous and do not trifle with me.

By mid-September, the crisis had passed, and Dreiser was congratulating himself on having a "sweetheart who is gay and aggressive." He had also returned to his insistence that he needed to provide Sara with "elegant clothing, a few splendid jewels, and suitable surroundings." Once again, he proposed a trip to Missouri and was hurt when Sara would not encourage him. Seemingly she feared his passion and recognized that in competition with his career she was running second. Concerning his sexual ardor, Dreiser argued on October 18, "It isn't fair to punish me for past actions in which you abetted me with aid of love and sentiment." He then went on to admit that he was ambitious, selfish and prideful, but he insisted that he was working for *their* future. "I think on advancement but you are included in that, and my pride and egotism sometimes seem to justify themselves in that they represent both you and I [sic]. If I had a fortune I would not need to banish these thoughts [of Sara] that consume my time and me when I give way to them. . . . As it is, desire for success [sic] invites, and each new point gained urges me on, until I fairly lose myself in running forward. . . . It isn't possible to go on alone and loveless. I need you and would gladly take you, but for the conditions involved. It won't be long tho' and you can afford to wait that time, which is nearer than ever."

Over the next month, Dreiser's letters begged Sara to believe that his love was more than mere passion and to be patient until he was financially secure. He also tried to break down her resistance to his proposed visit by frequent allusions to his nighttime "reveries." For example, on November 15, he teased, "If I could recall all I thought of then [during the night] you would have a letter to read, and to com-

plain of I think, for I certainly did with the Jug of my imagination just about as I pleased. I'm unreasonable that way, for it never comes to me that you might object under some circumstances." The postscript was deleted by whoever censored the correspondence.

Toward the end of November, Sara had apparently decided to change her strategy or perhaps capitulate, for she invited him to come as he desired. "You are, as I have ever said, the most inconsistent creature alive. One moment you swear that I cannot [visit] and the next that I can and must," he wrote on November 24. Immediately, he began to look forward to a few days with his "higher self"; however, eighteen more months were destined to pass before they were together. Why his plans were abandoned at that time remains uncertain, for only four letters from 1897 were included in the collection, and two of them are fragments. On January 20, Dreiser seemed to be alluding to his projected visit when he wrote, "It makes me feel all my blood to know that you love me and are willing in your love, to yeild [sic] yourself up to me. You are all there is in life--its greatest bliss for me is involved in your beauty. If I may not reap the delight of possessing you completely, then there is nothing." On January 26, he referred in passing to her "cunning" invitation. Beyond these two rather oblique references, no mention of the trip survives from 1897. The letters of March 24 and April 15 are passionate but wistful, as if Dreiser had no hope that his desires were soon to be fulfilled.

The next letter included in this collection is dated January 24, 1898, by which time Dreiser had become a free-lance journalist and had apparently agreed to a spring wedding. Sara, however, was hardly confident of his intention, as his attempts to console her demonstrate. "You make me feel criminal, truly, when you mourn so in words," he wrote on that date. "Heaven forgive me if ever I do you harm. . . . Ah, you little red-halo-ed Venus, you cannot want me more than I want you." Dreiser then proceeded to discuss plans for a honeymoon that included the Brandywine, Tarrytown and Lake George.

Nevertheless, signs of ambivalence persisted. On February 1, he devoted a long letter to their housing options after the honeymoon and confessed that he was unsettled by the decisions. "I'll pay your fare if you'll run away and come here and help me think it out," he added, perhaps trying to circumvent the formalities. Six days later, he expressed his fear of a public ceremony and asked Sara to consider a private wedding in New Jersey. "You may find me to [sic] nervous to venture into your town before the time comes," he lamented. "I can't tell you Jug, what a nervous horror I have of doing

before others what seems such a private matter of ours." On February 16, he parried her complaints that he was becoming neglectful with the warning that his writing assignments would force him to be away from her a great deal after their honeymoon. A week later, Dreiser observed that practical considerations and romance were unfortunately incompatible. He then engaged in another lengthy discussion of housing options and costs, again reminded her of the traveling that he would have to do during the coming summer and suggested that they postpone the wedding. On March 2, he repeated his suggestion that they delay the marriage because of his summer commitments.

Sara met Dreiser's request for a postponement with a lengthy silence that filled him with anxiety and self-reproach. "Oh Jug," he anguished on March 26, "if you were only less tender; if your dear heart were only less romantic, your love less enduring, your soul less constant and clinging. I think you would have suffered less. Such a wealth of love no man deserves, and much less I. . . . Oh that one so loving and so tender should be made to hope unsatiated for so long. . . . Dearie, love, my Jug, my own, I suffer for, I suffer with, you."

By early April, Sara had yielded to the inevitable delay, causing the relieved and grateful Dreiser to agree to a late summer wedding: "If you insist (and I know you will and do)," he wrote on April 4, "I will promise truly for September 1st, although, Honey-girl, I cannot tell you just now what the summer will bring forth. I certainly will, barring the most urgent possibilities to the contrary." Then, as if to prepare Sara for the "most urgent possibilities to the contrary," Dreiser detailed the enormous demands that free-lance journalism placed on his time and energy.

The euphoria following his escape from a spring wedding soon gave way to gloom and further neglect. On May 5, he had to apologize for missing her birthday but excused himself by saying that he wanted no reminders of the past: "It seems all a great chase to old age and death, and for my part the time gets away from me so rapidly, I cannot account for it." Recalling the love they had felt upon parting two years earlier, Dreiser added ruefully, "I have often thought that that should have been our wedding day--of all the most appropriate. We were rife for union in its richest and truest sense. How our yearning souls would have rejoiced." Ten days later, after complaining of insomnia and calling himself "a self-torturer of the first order," he began to equivocate regarding a September wedding. "About what you say concerning September," he hedged, "I am treasuring it all up and you may be sure that, whatever I may do, it will not be for want of love. I cannot say more

now for it is not possible."

In late May, however, Dreiser's enthusiasm was rekindled when assignments for *Success* magazine required a trip to Chicago and offered the convenient opportunity to visit Sara. She, on the other hand, proved reluctant--first refusing to meet him in St. Louis and then not responding to his letters. But by June 10 she had agreed to see him, and Dreiser was ecstatic. "And to think we are confessedly waiting for each other's arms," he wrote on that date. "All the kisses are arranged for. No sooner alone than we embrace and I have my Baby clinging in my arms. Your lips, Baby, your lips! I want them. . . . You are right, we must be formal in public."

Seeing Sara again after two years seemingly removed all of Dreiser's doubts and stimulated a flood of long, passionate letters similar to those written during the summer of 1896. When he left her on June 20, Sara apparently asked him to delay writing for a time, but he broke that proposed silence the first night and on the train to Chicago composed a six-page effusion which began, "I have been wretched, wretched since the moment you left me and I shall be so, I know, until I see you again. I loved you before I saw you this last, but now there is but one woman in all the world for me and you are she. I love you, I want you. . . . Love, my love, idol of my life--oh, thou living shrine of all my devotion!"

Despite these continued passionate outbursts, however, the equivocations began again once Dreiser resumed his work. On June 30, he wrote, "It is your love I need, and your presence, and now I know it particularly. I could speak of a thousand reasons why, but shall refrain. Only believe, sweetheart, that if I do not come for you this September it is not my fault, but the result of unavoidable conditions." In increasingly brief letters of July and early August, Dreiser continued to dwell on his loneliness and the anticipated blisses of their wedding night, but he made no specific commitment regarding a wedding date. Sara's anxiety resulted in another period of silence, about which he expressed concern on August 10.

When she did write, it must have been to complain that his ambitions were again coming between them, for on August 15 Dreiser reaffirmed, with characteristic vagueness, the seriousness of his intentions: ". . . this year yet I shall have you--it matters not what. I will take you if every plan of mine prove unsuccessful [sic]. I shall trust to fate, for I cannot live longer without you. You may expect me there sometime within the next forty days--as to the exact day I cannot say now." August then slipped away while Dreiser bemoaned his

indecisiveness. "It seems as if something dinned into my aching ears all the time the cry 'losing time, losing time,' and I own with a miserable heart that I am," he wrote on August 31. Then, two days later, he reiterated his terror of a public ceremony: "I could not kiss you before a crowd--nor friends, nor relatives. When I fondle you it must be wholly alone--when we can have each other in the silence of a secret chamber. . . . Anyhow, people who make public display of affection sicken me. They are dull, beastly, I think. Animals do that, and only people with strong animal natures. It was never a trait of mine." Then the correspondence sent to the Lilly Library breaks off with two letters, September 4 and 6, devoted largely to Dreiser's brief stay in Portland, Maine, to research an article.

The marriage did not take place until December 28, when Sara acceded to Dreiser's wishes and came east to Washington, D. C., where they were married at a ceremony attended only by Sara's sister Rose. After over five years of waiting, Sara had won out over the "bitch-goddess Success" and Dreiser's own reluctance to commit himself to a permanent relationship, but her victory was only temporary. As the courtship letters so plainly demonstrate, Dreiser's ambivalence was deep-seated and recurring; thus, after twelve stormy years of marriage, Sara and Dreiser separated permanently.

DREISER NEWS & NOTES

Dreiser Collection at Emory University

On the evening of October 25, 1983, the Friends of the Emory University Libraries and invited guests assembled for a program and reception to honor Dr. Vera Dreiser, who has donated her personal collection of Dreiseriana to the Special Collections Department of the Robert W. Woodruff Library. The program was opened by Tedi Dreiser Godard, Dr. Dreiser's daughter, who read two selections from Theodore Dreiser's poetry, "The Road I Came" and "To a Wood Dove." Tedi was followed by her husband, Joel C. Godard, Jr., who performed "As With a Finger in Water" and "Requiem." Guest speaker for the evening was Dr. Neda Westlake, Curator of the Rare Book Collection at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Westlake spoke on "The Peril and Pleasure of Editing Theodore Dreiser," focusing primarily on her work as General Editor of the University of Pennsylvania Edition of *Sister Carrie*. Following the program was a reception, featuring an exhibition of selected items from the collection donated by Dr. Dreiser.

The collection is rich in photographs, correspondence, genealogical information and other memorabilia that reflects the outstanding achievements of the Dreiser family, particularly those of Theodore, Paul and Edward. Relevant to Theodore's career are twenty-nine books by or about him, many of which are signed or inscribed first editions. There are also eighty-four pieces of his correspondence, including photocopies of the courtship letters to Sara "Jug" White from 1896 into 1898. Other items of interest are the death mask, a plaster cast of his hand, a book of Hubert Davis drawings for *An American Tragedy*, a typescript of *Dreiser: A Stageplay* by Tom Covel, and numerous photographs. Highlighting the success of popular songwriter Paul Dresser (John Paul Dreiser, Jr.) are twenty pieces of sheet music composed by Paul or published by his firm, photographs and other memorabilia. Recalling the acting career of Edward M. Dresser (Edward M. Dreiser), Dr. Dreiser's father, are photographs, theatre programs and scrapbook clippings. Dr. Dreiser's own distinguished career, including her research for *My Uncle Theodore*, can be traced through one-hundred-seventy notes and letters, sixty-nine published and unpublished items by or about her, the sheet music of three of her compositions and the typescript of *My Uncle Theodore*.

Dr. Linda M. Matthews, Head of Special Collections, has indicated that Emory University will add to the Dreiser collection when opportunities present themselves. Inquiries about the material and its use may be directed to Dr. Matthews, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, 30322.

R.W.D.

Dreiser Panel at MLA

While a reassessment of Dreiser's work is under way, it becomes apparent that more critical attention must be paid the Pennsylvania edition of *Sister Carrie* (1981), which restored about thirty-six thousand words from Dreiser's original manuscript. In establishing this edition the editors dealt with what they considered to be the problems of error, corruption, and censorship that had plagued the composition of the novel in 1899-1900. At the 1983 MLA Convention in New York, a special session was held by several of the old and new generations of Dreiser critics and scholars to discuss this topic, as well as to call the attention of a wider academic audience to the discussion. Professor Robert H. Elias, one of the few living Dreiser critics and biographers who personally knew Dreiser, agreed to participate in the panel discussion. Professor Philip L. Gerber (State University of New York), who was also invited to take part, was unable to do so because of illness.

The subject of the session was focused on comparison of the old and new editions of the novel with especial emphasis on theme and characterization. The initial questions posed by the moderator were (1) Is the new *Sister Carrie* a different novel? (2) If different, is it a better novel? The following are the abstracts of the papers presented by the panelists.

I

Stephen C. Brennan, Texas A and M University

"Dreiser's Literary Grace: The Original Ending of *Sister Carrie*"

The ending of *Sister Carrie* has been criticized for its failure to fulfill the novel's deepest implications. Dreiser himself seemed to recognize that adding the epilogue and revising the next-to-last chapter constituted a failure in artistry. As he told an interviewer in 1907, the problem in revising the ending was "not to round it out with literary grace" but to lead the story to "an elevation where it could be left and still continue into the future." The Pennsylvania edition, though it often shows Dreiser at his effusive worst, reveals the considerable "literary grace" with which he ended *Sister Carrie* when he instinctively followed the deepest implications of his own method. In this ending, Carrie is not a helpless, emotional seeker; she has evolved into "the perfect Carrie in mind and body, because now her mind was aroused." Dreiser conveys an impression of her growth through the richly metaphorical language that characterizes the earlier chapters (but not the revised ending). Especially important are references to music, which suggest Carrie's deepening capacity to feel and to find true sympathy and emotional harmony with Ames, and images of radiance, which suggest her growing power to move others. The sharper contrast between Carrie and Hurstwood deepens the novel's tragic effect, as Hurstwood's cold, lonely death is defined against Carrie's budding love for Ames and her entrance into a rich, purposeful human life. And without the epilogue, the novel arrives at something like the acquiescence and stasis of great tragedy as Hurstwood stretches himself wearily to "rest." (SCB)

II

Robert H. Elias, Cornell University

"Carrie Re-born; or, What's the Use?"

If Dreiser were to choose today between the Doubleday and Pennsylvania editions, he would probably be unwilling to settle for the reconstruction. He would be pleased by the Pennsylvania editors' restoration of the names of actual persons and

places, along with the mild oaths, and by the removal of the chapter headings; but beyond that he would find that the many deletions and abridgments he had accepted in 1900 could be reaffirmed as strengthening his purposes. The cutting out of authorial commentary and functionless scenes improved the narrative pace; the excision of Hurstwood's philandering sharpened the contrast with Drouet; the elimination of Carrie as lust object removed an obstacle to the presentation of her artistic appeal; the contraction of the relationship between Carrie and Ames saved Dreiser from having to change the direction of his novel and enabled him to conclude with the juxtaposition of the careers of Carrie and Hurstwood. The epilogue he had added in 1900, though, he would certainly have wanted kept: to omit it is to violate Dreiser's scheme, an editorial act out of keeping with his bent and at odds with the thrust of the tale. At the same time, despite what may be said against it, the Pennsylvania edition is of great biographical and critical importance, for it makes clear what went on in Dreiser's workshop and enables us to discuss more intelligently than we could before the strengths and flaws of the Doubleday edition that has been with us all these years. (RHE)

III

Paul A. Orlov, Pennsylvania State University

"Melodrama, Morality, and Thematic Impairment in the New *Sister Carrie*"

In the 1900 edition of *Sister Carrie* Dreiser most slyly and compellingly subverts "genteel" moral assumptions by making his novel parody the very kind of literature embodying them. This text contains various scenes and motifs that strikingly suggest the melodramatic plays and sentimental novels from which Dreiser's book so drastically differs. By invoking some of the clichés of such works and by infusing his story with some of their elements, Dreiser creates the outline of a plot--a shadowy "pseudo-plot"--against which his actual story stands, mocking moral judgments of the conventional-minded of the day. The new Pennsylvania edition of the novel, on the other hand, for all its publicized passages of sexual candor, impairs the fictional force of Dreiser's un-idealized moral view: (1) ironically, restored passages in which the novelist characterizes Drouet and Hurstwood more harshly in one sense amount to his capitulation to the precise perspective on morality that he intended his art to shatter; (2) scenes once richly redolent of the aura of melodrama are now less effective (and thus, less successful as parody) because of thousands of words of narrative that are mainly distracting, unnecessary, and irrelevant to the subversive core; (3) a famous restoration in the new text--that in which Hurstwood has decided to

take the money just before the safe clicks shut--also contributes to a weakening of the very moral relativism so essential to Dreiser's original world-view. In sum, then, on purely artistic (rather than textual) grounds, one must conclude that "less" (the 1900 edition of *Sister Carrie*, according to the Pennsylvania editors) is in fact a good deal "more"! (PAO)

The remaining time of the session was spent for open discussion involving the audience. Mrs. Marguerite Tjader Harris responded with a few remarks: (1) the 1900 edition is a better novel because Dreiser intended to "lift up the spirit of our heroine at the end of the novel"; (2) Dreiser's characteristic design *not* to leave a brooding character, such as Etta in *The Bulwark*, unhappy at the end of the book would apply to Carrie's characterization. Professor Hershel Parker, disagreeing with the panelists' general consensus that the new *Sister Carrie* is an artistically inferior work, observed that the cuts made in the 1900 edition are "patched up" in the new edition not only textually but artistically. For Parker, the cuts in the old edition do not necessarily enhance the narrative pace; the new edition enables us to better grasp the continuities of thought and action as the 1900 text fails to do. In short, his evaluation is in complete agreement with the Pennsylvania editors' contention that the new version of the novel is "infinitely richer, more complex, and more tragic" than the old one.

Parker's argument for the fictional principle, "More is More," is in marked contrast with Orlov's, "Less is More." Perhaps it is not a fruitful approach to the analysis of *Sister Carrie* to weigh the two critical tenets, for they seem to merely account for two entirely different kinds of fiction at hand. One kind, the realistic novel, thrives on actual detail and authorial explicitness; another, the "romantic" novel, values ambiguity and symbolic detail over elaboration and savors authorial implicitness. Which version of *Sister Carrie* is preferred, as asked by Elias, thus becomes a moot question; the answer may well depend upon one's choice of the kinds of fiction. Now we know, thanks to the Pennsylvania editors, that during the composition of *Sister Carrie* Dreiser himself had debated over the two kinds of fiction. Though one cannot exactly say that the new edition is in the tradition of "the novel" whereas the old one belongs to "the romance," one can witness how strongly this dualism in American fiction manifests itself in Dreiser.

Yoshinobu Hakutani